15th SCRA Biennial Conference
Final Report and Recommendations

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The 15th Biennial Conference of the Society for Community Research and Action took place from June 25-28, 2015 in Lowell, Massachusetts at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. After a full day of preconference events on Wednesday, June 24, the conference ran for three and a half days –Thursday morning the 25th through midday on Sunday the 28th. The conference program featured 93 symposia, 92 roundtable discussions, 20 town meetings/workshops, and 4 plenary sessions. The 169 posters were divided into three poster sessions. There were 1,007 people listed as presenters/authors on conference sessions. The overall conference revenue was $189,060. Conference expenses totaled $148,352.03, leaving SCRA with $40,707.97 in net revenue.

CONFERENCE PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Committees and Workgroups

The overall conference planning was chaired by Andrew Hostetler. The Local Planning Committee consisted of faculty, staff, and alumni of the University of Massachusetts Lowell, as well as local community members. This committee met regularly (initially monthly but more frequently as the conference approached), and made the majority of decisions related to the conference program and logistics. The planning committee was divided into the following subcommittees to organize specific aspects of the conference: Program; Space, Food, and Transportation; Entertainment; Community Engagement; AV; Social Media, and; two Plenary subcommittees. Although the full planning committee was involved in making all important decisions, the delegation of specific tasks led to greater efficiency. The full list of planning committee members are listed on the cover page of this report.

Meg Bond and SCRA President Bret Kloos served as Program co-chairs. We contracted with Nyssa Snow-Hill to develop the conference app; her work was supervised by Bret.

Victoria Scott, SCRA Administrative Director, and Fabricio Balcazar, Past President, participated in periodic conference calls and served as ex-officio members of the planning committee. Jim Emshoff, Treasurer, consulted on the development of contracts with various contractors (venue, transportation, meals, etc.). AMC Source, SCRA's association management company, was also involved in coordinating certain tasks, primarily online and on-site registration. There was a major staff change within AMC Source less than two weeks before the start of the conference; our primarily contact Haley Shelton Bernhard left and Rasheeda Wallerson took her place. We were informed about this shift in staffing on June 12th.

Conference Theme

In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the foundational gathering in nearby Swampscott, the local planning committee chose the theme, "Bridging Past and Future: 50 Years of Community Psychology." This theme guided decisions regarding the conference program, most notably the plenary sessions. The first plenary involved a commemoration of the Swampscott gathering, reflections on its continuing legacy, and a consideration of voices and perspectives that continue to be under-represented in community psychology. Plenaries on immigration and same-sex marriage honored local contributions to these struggles while also contemplating next steps.

Call for Proposals and Submission Guidelines

The Call for Proposals (CFP) was posted on the SCRA website and distributed via several SCRA-sponsored listservs and the full member database email list. It was also distributed via the listservs of other professional organizations, including SPSSI, the Asian American Psychological Association, and APA Divisions 35 and 45. We generally asked colleagues to share the post with their professional networks, so it was not possible to track all the places where the CFP might have appeared.

The Call specified the following five, standard session types: Poster, Roundtable Discussion, Symposium, Town Meeting, and Workshop. Proposals were initially due on December 15, 2014, but the deadline was extended to January 5, 2015 to provide more time during a busy time of year.

In the written CFP, we placed an official limit of four session proposals per person, but this was very difficult to enforce. Some members were involved in as many as seven or eight presentations, which resulted in many scheduling conflicts. We also learned that, at least in a few instances, colleagues names were added to proposals without prior consultation with the potential contributor. It is recommended that future Biennials find a workable solution to impose a per-person limit on the number of proposal submissions (excluding poster sessions, business meetings, and plenaries). This would ideally involve some way to program the proposal submission software (All Academic) to automatically limit the number of times a presenter can be listed on different sessions. The repeated participation of a cohort of presenters not only reduced the degrees of freedom for the organizers around scheduling, but a few comments on the formal evaluation also alluded to repeated presentations by the same person/s as limiting the interest value of conference substance.

In addition, there was no limit on the number or presenters listed on any particular session proposal. This became another issue that constrained program scheduling, i.e., it is extremely difficult to avoid scheduling conflicts with sessions that list upwards of 10 presenters. Since it is extremely unlikely that everyone in such a large group of people will actually make formal presentations during a session, we suggest that organizers develop a system to limit the number of participants on each session who are listed as "presenters" (i.e., the people for whom the scheduling software won't allow conflicts).

Recommendations: *Limiting the number of session proposals on which any one author can be listed as a participant and limiting the number of presenters that can be listed on any one session as a presenter would help considerably to reduce conflicts while scheduling.*

Online Abstract Submission and Management

Proposals were submitted via the All-Academic online system. This was the same software used by the 2011 and 2013 Biennial Conferences. There were many advantages to using this system, but there are also functions that could be added or improved. There were also some negative aspects of All-Academic.

Advantages:

- An entirely paperless submission system
- The ability to get real-time, detailed reports on the amount and types of session proposals,

including detailed information on each author

- A reasonably simple search system to find specific sessions that needed changes after being accepted (removing a presenter, adding a discussant, etc.)
- A scheduling system that automatically alerts the scheduler of any potential conflicts
- The hosting of a searchable website with the final conference schedule that updates immediately when updates are entered by conference organizers
- The production of reports that can be directly imported into the printed conference program

Disadvantages:

- First, organizers should be aware that just because the scheduling of sessions is computerized, there are still no shortcuts or ways to schedule multiple sessions with one simple algorithm. Organizers are still required go to through accepted session one by one and assign each to its own time slot.
- Making scheduling changes within the system after sessions were assigned to their time slots was also somewhat cumbersome. Changes are inevitable as participants cancel, request changes, etc. When entering such changes into the scheduling system, the user had to first completely remove the session from the program and then reschedule it (a two-step process that was sometimes tricky to track), rather than being able to simply edit the schedule. This was not a problem on a small, case-by-case basis, but for large scale changes to the program it became quite time-consuming. This led to delays in finalizing the conference program and resulted in it being posted to the website much later than the planning committee had hoped.
- We did not see any mechanism for limiting the number of sessions on which individual presenters could participate. This function would be extremely helpful for the scheduling reasons mentioned above.
- Similarly, it would be good to activate a function within the All Academic system to set a maximum number of presenters for each session.
- There were also distinctions indicated in the submission process about the roles of each participate which were not intuitive – and were widely misunderstood by submitters. The most troubling example is that people who indicated that they were “sessions organizers” when they submitted their proposal were not listed in the formal print outs of presenters from All-Academic; the only participants listed in any printout and in the online program, were those who checked the box for “presenter”. It did not become clear to us that any “organizer” who was also a “presenter” had to enter their name twice, once for each separate roles when they submitted their proposal. Making changes within the system, such as adding participants whose names were left off of the original online and printed programs because they had only checked the box for “session organizer,” took considerable time.

A more general concern was the fact that the system was simply not very intuitive or user-friendly for submitting proposals. For example, major problems arose when individual submitters had multiple user accounts within All Academic. A few people were unaware that they could use their SCRA membership login to access the system, and thus created a duplicate account for themselves. In other instances, a session organizer created new account for participants in his/her session without being aware that some already had accounts within the AA system. These duplicate accounts made it impossible to properly determine conflicts during scheduling and hampered any author search within the online program one that was posted.

Recommendation: *If SCRA wishes to continue with All-Academic, work with them to re-design the system, fixing some of the issues mentioned above and throughout this report. In addition, the instructions on the webpage for people submitting proposals needs to be very clear around issues such as: 1) the definitions of "session organizer" and "presenter" and 2)how to set up an account for each user (& the importance of not creating multiple accounts for the same person). Overall, the system needs to be less rigid and more intuitive.*

Proposal Reviews

Following some initial confusion regarding whether the national or local committee was responsible for recruiting reviewers, a request for volunteers was issued by the local planning committee via the SCRA email listserv. In total, 127 people volunteered to review proposals through the All-Academic online system, and all but one completed their assignments. Most reviewers were assigned 6 or 7 proposals (though some completed more, some fewer), typically 3-4 sessions and 3 posters. The online system did not allow proposals to be automatically assigned, whether randomly or according to specific criteria. Therefore the assignment of proposals to reviewers took considerably more time than anticipated. Accordingly, we asked All Academic to add the key words from user profiles to the reviewer information, so that manual assignment was at least guided by an effort to match proposal topics to reviewer expertise. This process resulted in each proposal having at least two external reviews.

Reviewers were generally able to use the online system without any issue. They were asked to score each proposal on 5 different categories – Significance to field, Congruence with SCRA Principles, Quality of Scholarship/Methods, Substantive Contribution, and their recommendation for accepting or rejecting the proposal. These were largely the same as the categories used in the 2013 Biennial review process, but the "congruence to conference theme" category was added. Reviewers were allowed to type in comments, but most did not. This could be because of the many dimensions on which they were asked to assess the proposal. Ratings on dimensions did not vary tremendously from dimension to dimension (did not seem that reviewers were really distinguishing among dimensions); thus future hosts might be better served by asking for ratings on fewer dimensions and encourage the reviewer to provide actual commentary.

After receiving the external reviews, ratings for each proposal were examined by all three members of the Program Subcommittee. Proposals were accepted based on external reviews, though final decisions were made by the Program Subcommittee. As in the past, the planning committee struggled with inclusivity vs. selectivity. Accepting more proposals obviously translates into higher registration numbers and greater revenue, and provides experience to students who might otherwise have limited opportunities to present at a professional conference. On the other hand, capping the number of sessions accepted would arguably lead to higher quality, fewer concurrent sessions, and higher attendance at sessions.

Ultimately, we opted for inclusivity somewhat by default. Since reviewer ratings were uniformly high, we lacked clear criteria for rejecting many proposals. Further, since most reviewers did not include any narrative explanation for their ratings, we had little else to go on. Ultimately, only a handful of proposals were rejected outright, though we asked several submitters to convert symposia to posters or roundtable discussions (based on the small number of papers or presenters or proposed content

that did not fit a symposium format).

Recommendation: *If future conferences continue to use the All-Academic software, consider requesting that they include a feature that automatically assigns reviews. The reviewer forms also may warrant changes – the planning committee suggests simplifying it to one or two 1-5-point scales and requiring some reviewer comments.*

Development of a Conference Schedule and Program

In light of feedback from previous Biennials about not offering too many concurrent sessions, the planning committee decided to aim for no more than 10 concurrent sessions when possible. However, our efforts were complicated by the large number of accepted sessions, by our decision to have concurrent roundtable sessions in the same space, and by the late addition of two awards plenaries. Sessions were structured around five plenaries and three poster sessions.

Session lengths were somewhat shorter than in the past, which was deemed preferable to having more longer sessions at the same. Specifically, sessions were 50, 60, 75 and 90 minutes long. In the call for proposals, we indicated that there would only be 50- and 75-minute sessions, and some submissions expressed a preference (usually for the longer session). Ultimately, however, sessions were assigned slots based on both the type of session and the number of presenters (though sessions with multiple presenters were not guaranteed longer slots) – and sometimes based on schedule conflicts for presenters. Symposia were 60 or 75 minutes; town hall meetings and workshops were 75 or 90 minutes. The degrees of freedom around session lengths were limited due to the large number of sessions we sought to include.

Roundtable discussions were scheduled concurrently in a ballroom set up with roundtables and were generally 50 minutes. Some past biennials have trended toward having roundtable sessions in their own rooms, but we thought it worthwhile to go back to the spirit of roundtables as sites for more informal discussion and hold the sessions around real round tables. While the roundtable room was a bit chaotic at times, we received feedback that participants appreciated the format, which also had an unintended positive side effect of also promoting some conversation between tables from time to time. We did note that a few comments on formal biennial evaluation suggest a larger venue for these tables, with both more room for each round table and more room between tables.

Because of the large number of accepted posters (177), the planning committee decided to hold three separate poster sessions (with ~60 posters each) to create a more intimate experience for presenters and attendees. We were able to schedule two of the poster sessions during lunches and without competing concurrent sessions. The third poster session was at a time with concurrent sessions. We worked to group the posters into the three sessions by topic area, which seemed to work reasonably well. In addition, we spent considerable time clustering posters into groups of 3-5 according to topic, with the hope that having these smaller pods might facilitate discussion among poster presenters. In retrospect, the work to organize the large poster sessions by topical areas worked well; the time to create clusters/pods within the larger sessions was probably not worth the time and energy involved.

We initially aspired to keep our conference days to shorter hours than in the past, and we had hoped to carve out more time for breaks and lunches to encourage the informal conversations and networking that participants seem to value. However, in order to include all the plenaries planned

and proposals accepted, most days started at 8am and went until 6:15 pm. We acknowledge that this packing of each conference day is not ideal, but we ultimately found that there was no other way to accommodate so many sessions. In addition, we had originally thought that we should try limit the programming for the final half day on Sunday, but also found that impossible given the demands on program time. From our own observations and informal feedback, the longer days and longer overall conference were generally well received, and we received few complaints about poorly attended sessions. However, we did note that a few comments on the formal evaluation express a desire for longer breaks between sessions.

Recommendations: *Future Biennial hosts should continue to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a low rejection rate (& thus larger number of sessions), and should seek input from the SCRA membership. Shorter session lengths are a viable option that should also be considered and generally seemed to work well in 2015. However, decisions regarding the total numbers of sessions to include should not be made in the absence of clear guidelines and criteria related to the acceptance and rejection of proposals.*

Further, we recommend that future biennial planners continue to structure roundtables such that they promote the original goal of informal discussion among participants. Scheduling many such sessions within the same ballroom can allow organizers to include more such sessions on the program; but we recommend larger ballrooms and more space for/between tables for future such sessions.

Although the Summer Institute was not officially "part" of the biennial, it was organized in parallel. Some of the logistics around planning the institute ended up falling on the biennial program committee, since we were the ones most familiar with the local context. For example, we were able to fold the room costs of the preconference day (Wednesday) into the overall contract with the Inn and Conference Center, saving overall expenses to SCRA. Additionally, we intervened in the ordering of food for the Institute to help to save costs (again something we could do because of our greater knowledge of the local situation and ICC policies). The Summer Institute sessions that were held as a pre-conference on the Wednesday before the official opening of the biennial conference went more smoothly than the Sunday morning Institute sessions that were concurrent with other conference sessions. Having Institute workshops on Sunday became complicated for the conference planners on several fronts: 1) finding sufficient meeting rooms without incurring additional costs, 2) conflicts for presenters who were on conference sessions but also wanted to participate in Institute workshops (along with requests from participants for us to shift their conference sessions to accommodate their interest in attending a workshop), 3) the logistics of multiple registration sites (for conference vs. for institute), and 4) the logistics of food for conference vs. institute. We note that one comment on the formal evaluation suggests that Institute courses be interspersed during each conference day. We strongly urge future planers to avoid this scenario. From our experience, most conference goers will not understand the distinction between Conference vs. Summer Institute; there will be tremendous potential for confusion about who is planning which sessions (& incurring associated costs); and some who register for Summer Institute workshops will resent paying extra for sessions that are offered during a conference for which they have also already paid a registration fee.

Recommendation: *We strongly recommend that the Summer Institute be held only on the Wednesday before the start of the formal conference. This would be to not only to avoid the complications outlined above, but also because it seems quite possible that registrations for the Wednesday Institute sessions would have been more robust if fewer different workshops were offered (see separate Institute report that includes information about one cancelled workshop and others that had small enrollments). If there is a desire for more workshops during the conference days, it would far simpler if such workshops were incorporated into the regular conference program – while there were several already on the regular conference program, future planning committees could consider offering more.*

Plenary Sessions and Invited Addresses

The local planning committee determined early in the planning process that we wanted to invite speakers that would both align with the conference theme, and would also highlight some unique aspects of the Lowell/Massachusetts context. Thus we organized our three primary plenary sessions around the themes of 1) the 50th anniversary of Swampscott, 2) immigration issues, and 3) gay marriage. Two additional plenaries were included to feature our Sarason and distinguished contribution award winners. The details about three primary plenaries are as follows:

Opening Plenary: Reflections on the Swampscott Conference

Meg A. Bond, Plenary Chair
The Swampscott Conference in Context: Video Recollections
James Dalton & Maurice J. Elias
Reflections on Paradigmatic Shifts
Regina Langhout
Prioritizing the Local in an Age of Globalization: Sociocultural Shifts since Swampscott
Urmitapa Dutta
Swampscott in International Context
Christopher Sonn
John Moritsugu, Discussant

Student Immigration Movement

Urmitapa Dutta, Plenary Chair
Welcome and Session Introduction
M. Brinton Lykes
Daring to Dream: Prospects for Immigration Reform in a Changing Political Landscape
Renata Borges Teodoro & Carlos Rojas Alvarez, Coordinators, Student Immigration Movement
Questions & Discussion
Thomas Pineros-Shields, Facilitator

Marriage Equality, LGBT Rights and Social Justice: Local Activists Lead the Way

Anne Mulvey, Plenary Chair
Marriage Equality in Context: Introduction - Patricia A. Gozemba
Grassroots Organizing and Political Advocacy: The Greater Lowell Equality Alliance
Kate Tyndall & Emile Dufour
Married LGBT Commonwealth of Massachusetts Employee Challenges DOMA

The communications about which award addresses would be made at the biennial versus at the APA conference was muddled. Some formal SCRA policy documents were somewhat contradictory, particularly with respect to where award addresses are to be made. It was at the 11th hour that we were informed that the Sarason Award address had to be on the Biennial schedule; that, plus the addition of an additional award for contributions to theory and research (two such awards were given in 2015), meant that rather than the typical 2 distinguished award address (one for theory and research and one for practice), meant we had to scramble to find time on the program for four such addresses. We developed a workable solution that involved adding two plenaries back to back – each an hour and 15 minutes long and each including two addresses of about 25 minutes plus a 5 minute introduction.

The two awards plenaries, both chaired by Bret Kloos, were as follows:

Plenary: Awards I

"Team Science, Justice, and the Co-Production of Knowledge"
Award for Distinguished Contributions to Theory and Research in Community Psychology
Jacob Tebes, Yale University

"What if a stitch in time only saves six?"
Award for Distinguished Contributions to Theory and Research in Community Psychology
Raymond Lorion, Towson University

Plenary: Awards II

"Facilitating Change: A Day in the Life of a Community Psychologist"
Award for Distinguished Contributions to Practice in Community Psychology
Pamela Imm, University of South Carolina-Columbia

"Le plus le meme…..Seymour, Psychology Misdirected, and the Anarchist Insight"
Seymour B. Sarason Award for Community Research and Action
Edison Trickett, University of Illinois at Chicago

Feedback about the plenary sessions was overwhelmingly positive.

Recommendation: *Future conferences should plan ahead for the talks given by the award recipients. Even though our schedule grid was the result of considerable last minute reworking and included extended days, we found that if worked reasonably well. If future biennial planners wish to use the schedule grid from 2015, please feel free (although it would be worth seeing if there is a way to tweak it to allow for longer breaks between sessions).*

Programs

There were four versions of formal conference programs that were shared with membership and conference attendees: 1) the professionally designed and printed program distributed on site and a pdf version of the same program that was available on the SCRA website, 2) a simple program grid

that included only sessions titles, times, and room numbers that was duplicated on a local copy machine and made available at the conference registration table, 3) a conference app available for download onto iPhones, and 4) an interactive program produced by All Academic available on a separate website, that participants could link to from the SCRA site.

The Formal Program – printed version on site and pdf version on the SCRA website

The formal conference program included information about conference basics (e.g., conference overview, registration details, accessibility information, information about the mentoring program, maps of conference venues, information about meals, transportation details, and emergency contact information). The program also included 11 pages with information about various groups that sponsored the program (more information about sponsorships is provided in the section on Conference Finances).

The printed program also included details related to the conference program (including details about plenaries, awards, a schedule grid, a list of poster sessions). The final 200 plus pages - that included conference abstracts, presenter information, presenter index, and a subject index - were produced by the All-Academic software. The resulting program was over 270 pages long. While the program chairs provided all of the text for this program, it was formatted by an experienced designer and printed by a local company.

We asked people to indicate whether they wanted a hard copy of the program when they registered, and as a result of those requests, we printed 225 copies (this reflects the number of requests plus a buffer of about 25 additional programs). We also posted a pdf version of the same materials on the website. We recommend that future committees continue to ask people whether they indeed want a printed program, and for that hard copy, produce something shorter and much more streamlined. More specifically, we suggest that the hard copy version skip all of the abstracts and indices and just include the conference basics, pages for conference sponsors, plus the schedule grid. The more detailed information can easily be included in the pdf version posted on the SCRA website, in the phone app version, as well as on the All Academic website (more on these other versions below). The more streamlined printed program will both be a greener alternative and will save considerable money on printing.

Program Grid

At the last minute, we decided to produce a simple handout that was a grid of just session titles, times, and locations. This was 16 pages long (copied 2 sided to save paper). About 400 copies were available for people to pick up on the registration table. All were given out, and from informal observations, these were used more often by participants than the full formally printed program. If the next conference organizers adopt the suggestion about a more streamlined printed program, there would be no need to have these grids as a separate handout.

Conference App

Following the precedent of the 2013 Biennial, we contracted with Guidebook to produce a conference program app that participants could download on their smartphones or computers. In addition to accessing the conference program, users could create a personal schedule, search by interest group, title, or author. Rather than scrolling through a pdf, the app allowed easy access to

events, maps, listings of award recipients, and sharing pictures. We took advantage of a special deal that enabled us to upgrade to the Silver Package for a reasonable additional charge—the total charge was $3150, just $250 more than for the 2013 Biennial. This package allowed for unlimited downloads of the app rather than 200 downloads at the lower price. It also included additional functions, such as push messaging, multiple tracks, and other features that we did not use. Given limited time and the logistics involved in creating the app, the planning committee hired a graduate student, Nyssa Snow-Hill from the University of South Carolina, to organize information in a format required by the app. This took much longer than anticipated since it involved searching the program carefully and entering the spreadsheets produced by All-Academic. Future planning would benefit from consulting the app requirements and creating reports from All-Academic in Guidebook format.

The app was downloaded by 397 users and was well received. Many conference attendees now expect to have an app available for conference information; this is becoming standard practice at conferences. Many prefer the convenience and portability of a mobile app and the ease of navigating information on an app rather than a website. The app can also distribute conference updates to participants more quickly and likely with greater reach than websites or newly posted pdf versions of a program.

All Academic Interactive Program Summary

A nice feature of the All Academic system is that it automatically produces an online, interactive summary of the program. It was quickly generated by All Academic once all program details were entered into the AA system, and it updates almost immediately when changes are made by conference organizers. Among the functions and interactive features are a day-by-day conference calendar, a browse/search function that sorts program information by person, day, room, session type, key word, and conference track (if applicable), and a personal schedule that users can create for themselves. Although this web-based program summary lacks some of the features of the app, it can be downloaded on and formatted for smart phones.

Accordingly, future planning committees should decide whether both this program summary and the app are necessary, or whether there are efficiencies to be realized in developing these concurrently. Norms of how people access information are changing. A website seems to be more useful for people planning to come to a conference and an app is more useful for people attending the conference when computer availability may be restricted. If people know that there will be an app available at the time of registration, they may be less likely to request a printed conference program. Additionally, future conference planners may want to evaluate how the functionality of a program planning platform and a conference app from one provider might help to save costs. Given conference trends, this may become a standard feature by the time of the next biennial.

Recommendation: *Printed programs are ultimately very costly and are detrimental to the environment. We strongly suggest printing a much more streamlined version in hard copy – and only printing it for those who request a copy when they register. Given the availability of a conference app as well as schedule information on two websites (SCRA and All Academic), there were plenty of ways for participants to access information about session abstracts and such so it seems unnecessary to print them. While we predict that there will be diminishing requests for printed versions over time, we suggest that we do not eliminate all printed material because many attendees still request and depend upon a hard copy version.*

CONFERENCE LOGISTICS

Registration

As in 2013, AMC Source was responsible for online and onsite registration. This included the development of an online form (with input from the planning committee), monitoring and management of online registration, member support, and the coordination of the onsite registration process. Drafts of the online registration form were available in February for feedback and testing. Presenters were informed about proposal acceptance/rejection decisions on March 16 and online registration went live on March 17. There were a few early snafus, including the omission of payment information for the banquet, but these were resolved fairly quickly (and registrants who indicated that they would attend the banquet without actually paying were contacted individually).

Pre-Registration

The large majority of attendees pre-registered for the Biennial (511 of 656 total registrations or 77.9%). Registration categories were mostly carried over from the 2013 conference, though fees were raised by an average of 5%, given that there had been no increase since 2011. Transactions could be made either via credit card or check.

Category	Early / Late Fee
Student SCRA Members	$130/ $140
Professional SCRA Members	$335 / $385
Student Non-Members	$155 /$165
Professional Non-Members	$375 / $425
International Professionals	$165 / $195
International Students	$65 / $85
Student One-Day	$105
Professional One-Day	$185

On-Site Registration

In total, 145 people registered onsite, more than three times the number that did so in 2013. Onsite registrants were allowed to register for the duration of the conference (at the late registration prices) or for just one day.

Attendance

	Pre-Registered	**On-Site**	**TOTAL**
Professional SCRA Member	167	40	207
Student SCRA Member	172	33	205
Professional Non-Member	53	17	70
Student Non-Member	54	19	73
International Professional	24	2	26
International Student	20	4	24
Professional One-Day	-	22	22
Student One-Day	-	8	8
Student Volunteer	21	-	21
TOTAL	**511**	**145**	**656**

International Attendees

Unfortunately, we had fewer international attendees than in 2013 (26 professional registrants vs. 44 in 2013 and, 24 student registrants vs. 28). These figures do not include the 38 Canadian registrants. The lower registration figures may be related to the appeal of and ease of travel to large urban centers for international participants, as well as the specific international appeal of Miami. Our 50 international attendees came from Australia, Canada, Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Portugal, Puerto Rico and the United Kingdom.

Hotels and Venues

The UMass Lowell Inn and Conference Center was the only venue in Lowell large enough to host the conference, as well as the only full service hotel within city limits. We initially considered holding sessions on the UMass Lowell South Campus, but this would have resulted in significantly higher transportation challenges and additional costs. In order to ensure that we had sufficient space, we separately contracted with Middlesex Community College (MCC, directly across the canal from ICC) and the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC, right across Warren St.) for additional space. We ultimately used 5 classrooms in the MCC Federal Building and the MCC Cowan Building Cafeteria for the poster sessions, and two meeting rooms at UTEC in addition to their function hall for the Friday morning plenary session. We noted that a few people wrote comments on their final evaluations about the distances between conference sites. While UTEC and MCC's primary site are so close as to be essentially contiguous to the ICC, the Federal building was a bit further away (about $1/5^{th}$ of a mile). In order to get sessions even closer together would require future planners to use a single large conference center or hotel, but even in some such sites, the sessions can be a hike from one another. Ultimately, it may well be that the only way that sessions can be closer to one another is to have fewer competing sessions in total.

The ICC serves as both a hotel and conference center and a dormitory for UMass Lowell students. We were only able to secure 150 hotel rooms (fewer on Wednesday, 6/24), so we also reserved approximately 90 dorm rooms, which can each accommodate up to three occupants. If every bed at the ICC were to be occupied, we could have accommodated well over 500 individuals. However, knowing that not all attendees would be willing to share, we initially reserved blocks of rooms at the Courtyard Marriott in Chelmsford (just across the Lowell city line) and the Chelmsford Radisson and arranged for shuttle service between these hotels and the ICC (see below).

We were only able to reserve relatively small blocks (15 to 20 rooms) at the Courtyard and Radisson without obligating ourselves financially for unsold rooms. We assumed we would be able to reserve additional blocks once the initial offering of rooms was booked. Unfortunately, and despite working with both the Lowell Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Merrimack Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau, we found out only in March that there was another very large conference scheduled for the same week. By that time, these two hotels and several others in the surrounding area were completely booked. We were eventually able to secure additional blocks at Holiday Inn and Town Place Suites in Tewksbury, as well as about 90 additional dorm beds (in two bedroom apartments) at Riverside Suites on the South Campus of UMass Lowell. Although several of the additional hotel rooms were booked, we did not end up using the additional dorm space because of lack of demand.

Regarding the ICC, having a central lobby where people could gather during the conference was a distinct advantage of holding the conference there. Participants seem to value having a place where

they can meet colleagues informally. However, on the formal evaluations, participants had some serious complaints about the ICC staff as well as about the quality of the accommodations (in particular the dorm rooms). We refer readers to the evaluation report for specifics. As organizers, we plan to give this feedback directly to our contact at the ICC as some of the issues raised are not at all on par with what we were assured we could expect.

Recommendation: *Although we believe that SCRA should continue to consider host sites outside of major cities, holding the conference in a mid-size city has both advantages and disadvantages. There can be a tradeoff between securing sufficient conference space and suitable lodging within close enough proximity to each other to avoid significant transportation challenges versus introducing our professional community to a variety of locales that support community psychology.*

Transportation

Shuttle service was arranged through the UMass Lowell, and provided by NRT Bus, Inc. out of North Reading, MA. Service was provided between the Inn and Conference Center and Radisson Chelmsford and Courtyard Marriott Shuttles ran on a loop between 7:30 and 10:00 AM (3 total pickups and drop-offs) and between 4:00 and 6:35 PM (3 total pickups and drop-offs), Thursday through Saturday. Evening service was available Thursday, 6/25 and Friday 6/26 from 8:00 to 10:35 PM (3 total pickups and drop-offs) and following the banquet on Saturday, 6/27 at 11:00 PM. On Sunday, 6/28 shuttle ran between 7:30 AM and 12:25 PM (6 total pickups and drop-offs).

A few problems were reported with respect to scheduled pickups at the Courtyard Marriott. NRT claimed that they made all scheduled stops, and that they had the GPS data to prove it, and they suggested that hotels guests simply didn't see the buses because of where they stopped. However, at least two conference participants were quite adamant that they failed to make certain pickups. Because UMass Lowell served as an intermediary between the planning committee and the transportation company, communication difficulties hampered our trouble-shooting efforts.

Food and Entertainment

In addition to an opening reception on Thursday, 6/25 (featuring passed hors d'oeuvres and cheese and crudité stations) and dinner banquet on Saturday, 6/27, we offered four breakfasts and three lunches. The reception, three breakfasts, and two lunches were catered by Aramark, the food service provider for UMass Lowell. An additional breakfast (on Friday, 6/26) was catered by and served at UTEC and an additional lunch was catered by Bianco's Catering and offered at the MCC cafeteria concurrent with the first poster session. The opening reception featured brief sets offered by three different artists (two musical and one spoken-word acts) and a roving accordionist, and the banquet featured performance by the local and nationally-renowned Angkor Dance Troupe.

Breakfasts

A fairly standard continental breakfast of fruit, pastries, bagels, juice, and coffee was offered at the ICC Thursday through Saturday mornings from 7:00 to 9:00 AM and on Sunday from 8:00 to 9:00 AM. The main Friday morning breakfast was held from 7:00 to 9:00 at UTEC in advance of the plenary session at the same locale, and did not include fresh fruit or juices (and cost considerably less), but we did offer

breakfast for 75 at the ICC for those not attending the plenary. Given lighter attendance at the beginning and end of the conference, orders were placed for 400 people on Thursday, 525 people on Friday (75 at ICC), 500 on Saturday, and 100 people on Sunday. This was generally more than enough food with the exception of Sunday, given that more attendees hung around than expected. The absence of gluten-free options on Friday was also a problem. Breakfasts were "grab and go" and set up outside of meeting rooms, which was convenient for attendees and necessary given the tightly-packed conference schedule.

Lunches

The Planning Committee initially planned for two box lunches, on Friday and Saturday, then decided to offer a third lunch in conjunction with the Thursday poster session in the Cafeteria of the MCC Cowan Building. The Thursday lunch (for 450 plus 6 gluten-free meals) was catered by Bianco's Catering and the Friday and Saturday lunches (for 540 each day) were catered by Aramark and available for pick up in three locations at the ICC. The Thursday lunch included choice of sandwich (three meat and one vegetarian option), chips, fresh fruit, a cookie, and beverage. Aramark lunches included a selection of sandwiches (two meat and one vegetarian and gluten-free option), chips, a side salad, and beverage. Fresh fruit and brownies/cookies were included in the price of the Aramark lunches, but we opted to pull these and offer them as an afternoon snack, instead.

The biggest problem with lunches was the lack of high-quality options for participants with dietary restrictions. This issue was particularly pronounced on Thursday, with gradual improvements over the course of the next two days. In the relatively last-minute booking of Bianco's, we neglected to secure gluten- or dairy-free options in advance (though gluten-free lunches were ordered at the beginning of the lunch service and eventually delivered), and did not offer enough non-red meat options. Nor did we go over the full list of registrants' dietary restrictions with Aramark until after the problematic Thursday lunch service. Although we were able to arrange for separate lunches for vegan and dairy-free participants on Friday and Saturday, the quality of the meals could have been much better and delivery logistics could have been smoother. We strongly recommend that the local planning committee print out the list of dietary restrictions and begin working with their caterer(s) as early as possible, arrange for an advance tasting of dietary restriction meals/food items, and—if necessary and feasible—even consider contracting with a separate caterer specializing in vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and dairy-free food. It could also help to overestimate the number of vegetarian options to provide because many meat-eaters will also take the vegetarian options.

Opening Reception

An opening reception was held on Thursday, June 25, the first full day of the conference. Overall, this was a festive event, attended by a large number of participants, and seemed to provide a welcome setting for reconnecting with colleagues and friends.

This event was hosted at the ICC and featured words of welcome from a member of the UMass Lowell administration (Julie Chen, Vice Provost for Research), three "busk" style performances (two musical and one spoken-word), a roving accordionist, passed hors d'oeuvres for 400, two food stations with cheese, fruit, crackers (for 300), and crudité (for 200), and a cash bar. Cheese and crudité were ordered for fewer people in light of advice from the Sales and Catering Manager and based on observations (i.e., of leftovers) from previous events.

The event was spread over two spaces, the ICC restaurant and bar (50 Warren) and the Lower Locks

meeting room and patio, which proved to be the greatest challenge, along with the timing of the performances. Specifically, the food stations were mobbed as soon as the event began at 6:30, leading to long lines in both locations. The welcoming remarks and performances in 50 Warren were also scheduled to begin close to 6:30, and ended up competing with the loud chatter from the food line. In fact, performances on this stage could not even be heard from the food line. The spoken-word performer adjusted, drawing those around the stage in closer for a more intimate performance. Fortunately, he was scheduled for a second performance later on the Lower Locks patio stage, where he received rapt attention and was very well received. One scheduled and one impromptu musical performance were also held on this stage. In general, the Lower Locks patio area drew the larger crowd and provided a better venue and, in retrospect—given the unused space in the Lower Locks rooms—should have been the sole location for the event. And although the food stations were depleted fairly quickly (though additional crudité was ordered), there were more than enough passed hors d'oeuvres to go around.

Banquet

The Banquet event was held on Saturday evening, 6/27 at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium (LMA) and catered by Lenzi's Catering of Dracut, MA. Given that large number of events hosted at the Inn and Conference and the drab, windowless nature of their grand ballroom, we decided to hold the banquet off site, and the LMA was both within short walking distance (5 minutes) of the ICC and one of the few other venues in Lowell large enough to host an event of this size. The LMA is a building of historic and architectural significance that typically hosts large performances and other spectator events. All the seating on the floor is moveable, allowing for up to 40 tables of 10 to fit comfortably. We sold 374 banquet tickets in advance and 6 at the door.* Based on the number of tickets sold as of Saturday morning, we ordered food for 390 people, though about 100 fewer desserts (on the assumption that not everyone would have dessert).

The event started at 6:30 with a cocktail hour. The cocktail was spread out over three contiguous areas: a large foyer (The Hall of Flags), a semi-circular hallway enclosing the auditorium itself (where concessions are located), and a patio overlooking the Concord River. The cocktail hour featured three cheese and crudité stations, three cash bars, and passed hors d'oeuvres. Fortunately, the weather cooperated, and we were able to use the patio area for the duration of the cocktail hour. At 7:20 PM, we began ushering attendees into the main auditorium for a relatively short program featuring a performance by the locally-based and nationally-known Angkor Dance Troupe, and a few announcements.

Dinner was announced at approximately 7:50 PM, and was served buffet style at the back of the first level of the auditorium. There were three food stations: A pasta station, a carving station featuring roast beef and sides, and a station with smoked salmon and sides. As with the opening reception, lines were quite long, though it is unclear what could have been done to avoid this. And although there were vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and dairy-free pasta options available, there was some miscommunication and subsequent confusion about access to these options (guests had to make a specific request in a designated area; although this was announced, not everyone heard or understood). A short program began around 8:30, including a slideshow tribute to recent retirees and a formal presentation of the annual SCRA Awards. Dessert was "finger-food" style and available in the Hall of Flags, so that attendees could "grab and go" on their way back to the ICC. Overall, the food was generally well received, though not necessarily by those with dietary restrictions.

We were also thrilled to be able to hire a DJ and offering dancing in the ICC Grand Ballroom after the

banquet. This was very well received—there were over 100 people on the dance floor at one point—and went on till after midnight. We recommend that future planning committees also consider doing this, as it was a very communal activity that appealed to conference attendees from multiple generations.

*These banquet figures are based on the most recent budget provided by AMC Source. However, we were informed by AMC Source on the morning of 6/27 that 390 advance tickets had been sold, and we sold 6 at the door, which would bring the total to 396. We have not been provided with a satisfactory explanation for this discrepancy as of 10/29/15.

"Mill City Mill About" and City Tours

From the outset, the planning committee wanted to place community at the center of the conference. In order to highlight local business and organizations and to encourage conference participants to explore Downtown Lowell, we offered four guided walking tours and organized the "Mill City Mill About" for Friday night, 6/26. Planning Committee member Anne Mulvey worked with an emeritus faculty member and long-time active SCRA member, Bill Berkowitz to organize two different free walking tours—an "Arts and Culture" tour and an "Immigration and Identities" tour led by the Lowell National Historical Park. There were two offerings of each tour, on Friday and Saturday from 12:00 to 1:45, with 15 available slots for each. The tours were promoted on the Biennial website and registration was managed by AMC Source, and they were quickly booked. As it turned out, the 15-person limit was slightly exceeded, with approximately 65 people participating in the four tours (though some people signed up for both).

The Mill City Mill About was a Lowell "open house" of sorts, designed to draw conference participants into the heart of downtown, including art galleries, stores, bars, and restaurants on Friday between 6:30 and 10:00 PM. The planning committee worked with the Lowell Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Merrimack Valley Conference and Visitors Bureau to encourage local businesses to participate and to offer incentives to attract conference attendees. Planning committee members ended up going door to door the week before the conference, contacting approximately two dozen business owners and managers, to secure participants for the event. Ultimately, 20 venues participated, with the businesses offering a variety of incentives (typically 10 or 15% off a specific item or the entire bill). We produced a guide for the event which highlighted participating businesses and local galleries that agreed to stay open till 8:00 PM, and listed other restaurants and attractions in the vicinity.

On the evening of the event, the planning committee chair walked throughout the downtown area, checking in with participating businesses, to assess how many conferences attendees participated. Because of the busy conference schedule, few attendees visited participating stores and galleries (which closed by 8:00), but many patronized participating restaurants.

***Recommendation**: Food costs were among the largest expenses incurred. These costs could always be reduced if future sites provided fewer breakfasts and lunches. However, there are also strong arguments for offering these meals on each day of the conference, as it adds to the "comfort factor" for participants. We also recommend that future biennials offer at least one "off-site" meal featuring a local business, whether this is the reception, the banquet dinner, or another event.*

Additionally, the committee should plan well in advance to provide high-quality food to participants

with dietary restrictions, even if this means contracting with a separate caterer. Over ordering vegetarian options could be helpful as many non-vegetarians are interested in these options as well.

Finally, food is an increasingly important political issue, and finding sustainable and locally-sourced food and beverage options is a high priority for many SCRA members, though often challenging from a resource perspective. SCRA should consider convening a committee well in advance of the next biennial to address these issues and develop guidelines for planning committees, without micromanaging their efforts and with the understanding that there are always specific local constraints.

Mentoring

For the seventh consecutive biennial, the conference featured a mentoring program designed and overseen by SCRA member Gloria Levin. She has prepared a separate report, which can be found in an addendum to this report (see page 21).

Staffing and Volunteers

During the conference, the registration desk served as the main point of reference for attendees. AMC Source had two staff members at the registration desk throughout the conference, handling on-site registration and addressing questions and concerns that arose. Volunteers also helped staff the registration desk (see below), and several planning committee members were available to answer questions and problem-solve throughout the conference.

A few problems arose with the registration process, including a decision made by AMC Source staff, without consulting with planning committee members, to distribute conference promotional items (a canvas bag and water bottle) only to registrants who requested a paper copy of the conference program. As soon as planning committee members became aware of this, we made it clear that ALL registrants were to receive these items, and we announced on the SCRA listserv that anyone who had not received these items could return to the registration desk to pick them up. There were also issues regarding the training of volunteers to help with registration—AMC Source assumed it was our responsibility, and we assumed it was theirs since they were in charge of registration.

Volunteers were recruited via the SCRA listerv and listervs of current students and alumni affiliated with the host institution (University of Massachusetts Lowell). Interested parties were instructed to complete an online application form (a shared Google Doc) which asked for: applicant's contact information, dates and times of arrival and departure from the conference, and availability for volunteering during conference. The planning committee received 41 completed volunteer applications. From this pool, 29 volunteers were selected to assist the planning committee during the Biennial. These volunteers received a discount of $100 on their registration fees in exchange for eight hours of service. The discount was provided in the form of a reimbursement following the conference to those who fulfilled their commitment. Volunteers wore distinct orange t-shirts with our CSP logo that made them easily identifiable.

During the conference, volunteers supported the event in at least one of the following 5 capacities: registration desk attendant, conference session attendant, usher, social media promoter, and logistics floater. Registration desk attendants greeted conference goers as they arrived at the

Biennial, provided them with registration materials and fielded general questions about conference happenings. Conference session attendants attended specific sessions where the planning committee anticipated specific logistical support would be needed (i.e. passing around microphones during a Q & A session). Ushers were stationed at various places across conference sites to give directions, field general questions, and be a visible point of contact for conference goers needing assistance. Social media promoters made posts to social media (e.g. Facebook & Twitter) from the conference session and encouraged other conference goers to share their Biennial experience on social media using the conference hashtag (#SCRA2015). Logistics floaters, helped out with a variety of tasks during the Biennial on an "on-call" basis (e.g., setup of boxed lunches).

While the planning committee originally envisioned holding a training session for all volunteers on-site prior to the start of the Biennial, this idea proved untenable as volunteers were arriving at various times during the conference. Instead, the volunteer coordinator emailed out a schedule containing each volunteer's assigned tasks during the conference and instructed all volunteers to check-in at the registration desk prior to beginning any volunteer shifts. To facilitate the orientation of volunteers at check-in and help coordinate volunteer efforts in real-time, two volunteer lead positions were created to assist the volunteer coordinator with explaining the tasks associated with the each volunteer position to volunteers. Volunteer lead positions were staffed by recent graduate student alums of the University of Massachusetts Lowell's Community Social Psychology program. Volunteer leads also served in an "on-call" capacity to assist the planning committee with issues that arose during the conference.

Each volunteer was expected to give 8 hours of service during the conference. This yielded 232 volunteer hours to be allocated for conference support tasks. (Volunteer leads are not counted in this tally; both leads contributed well over 8 hours during the course of the conference). 43% of these hours were allocated to ushers, 31% of these hours were allocated to registration desk attendants, 13% of these hours were allocated to social media promoters, 8% of these hours were allocated to logistics floaters, and 5% were allocated to conference session attendants. All 29 volunteers gave 8 hours of service.

Recommendation: *Establish a procedure for registration, in consultation with AMC Source (or other conference management service), in advance of the conference and collectively ensure that all volunteers are appropriately trained.*

CONFERENCE EVALUATION RESULTS

Following the conclusion of the conference, a survey link was sent out to 656 conference attendees via email. There were 351 completed responses, accounting for 54% of all attendees. The conference evaluators, Sherri Brokopp Binder and Kwesi Craig Brookins, have provided a very comprehensive report, which is an invaluable complement to the information presented in this report. The evaluation report is available through the SCRA Administrative Director, Victoria Scott.

CONFERENCE FINANCES

The conference generated registration revenues of $127,655 (includes registration and banquet ticket sales). The planning committee also secured $19,668 in internal contributions (from various departments) and $11,500 in external donations (from publishers, other universities, and local

businesses and organizations). This brought overall conference revenue up to $191,228.00. Conference expenses totaled $150,802.03, leaving SCRA with net revenue of $40,425.97*

A full breakdown of the revenues and costs can be found in the accompanying PDF, titled "SCRA 2015 Biennial Budget 10.15.15"

*Note that we do not consider these figures final, as not all sponsorship funds have been received, and questions remain about banquet revenue.

SUMMARY

The Lowell SCRA Biennial was highly successful on many fronts – it was well attended; it generated considerable enthusiasm among participants; the plenaries and the sessions were commended; participants had varied opportunities beyond the formal program to socialize with one another and to be introduced to a unique city where community psychology-related work is happening daily AND it actually made money for SCRA (even though we were assured that this was not one of the primary goals of the conference).

Recommendations are summarized throughout this report, but we want to reiterate some of the key recommendations here:

<u>In general:</u>

- *Explore the pros and cons of holding the conference in a mid-size city. A challenge can be finding appropriate conference space and transportation complications. The advantages include introducing our professional community to a variety of locales that support community psychology. We strongly discourage SCRA from resorting to a single location – as some have suggested – as that is not in keeping with community psychology principles.*
- *Continue to feature the local community in some way. Participants gave us tremendous positive feedback about the tours and the opportunities to explore Lowell.*
- *Have a dance!*
- *Continue to secure conference sponsors and offer "ads" in the conference program. We were able to raise significant funds through such efforts, which enabled us to provide more comforts (mainly food but also bags and bottles) for attendees.*
- *Consider working with a new conference management firm. There were significant problems working with AMC Source in both 2013 and 2015. The most valuable service they provided was help with processing registrations. Many conference planners may find that they have a more cost effective option for these services more locally.*

<u>In terms of program submissions:</u>

- *Using software like All-Academic is worth the expense, but explore options to help address some of the issues mentioned in this report.*
- *Limit the number of session proposals on which any one author can be listed as a participant and limit the number of presenters that can be listed on any one session as a presenter would help considerably to reduce conflicts while scheduling.*
- *Explore whether the software chosen can automatically assign reviews.*
- *Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of a low rejection rate (& thus larger number of sessions). Revising the review process and rating criteria might help in this regard.*

In terms of the program itself:

- *We found that our grid for program scheduling worked fairly well, but consider the pros and cons of limiting the number of competing sessions vs. expanding breaks between sessions.*
- *Continue to structure roundtables such that they promote the original goal of informal discussion among participants, but we recommend larger ballrooms and more space for/between tables for future such sessions.*
- *Plan ahead for the talks given by the award recipients and balance with locally planned plenaries as it is nice to have plenaries that also celebrate issues unique to the locale of the conference. But anticipate that finding times in a conference schedule for plenaries without other competing sessions can be a challenge.*
- *We strongly recommend that the Summer Institute be held only on the Wednesday before the start of the formal conference and not overlap with any of the formal conference time.*

Other Conference Logistics:

- *Develop a more streamlined version of the printed program and print copies only for those who request them.*
- *Continue to provide some sort of app or web version of the program – but it seems unnecessary to provide both of the options we did in 2015.*
- *Provide as many meals as possible as part of the conference registration fee. This seems to be valued and contributes to the sense of community, but explore at least one "off-site" meal featuring a local business, whether this is the reception, the banquet dinner, or another event.*
- *Plan well in advance to provide high-quality food to participants with dietary restrictions, even if this means contracting with a separate caterer. Over ordering vegetarian options.*
- *Explore sustainable and locally-sourced food and beverage options*

ADDENDUM - REPORT ON THE 2015 MENTORING PROGRAM

Submitted by Gloria Levin

The mentoring program at SCRA's 2015 biennial conference (Lowell, MA) was the seventh iteration of this offering. Always targeted to students, early career graduates and professionals new to the field of community psychology, the program also continues with the original structure: an orientation breakfast (orientation to attending the conference and to the mentoring program, with an emphasis on mentees taking full advantage of the conference); small group discussions hosted by a diversity of mentors; and opportunities for individual meet up's with the mentors. However, at each iteration of the program, various innovations have been tested – either retained, modified or dropped at subsequent conferences. Co-founded by Gloria Levin and Andrea Solarz for the New Mexico conference, Gloria has organized the program at every subsequent biennial conference.

Twenty-one mentors were available – ranging from (two) graduate student mentors to senior community psychologists – a mix of academics and practitioners, gender, minority status, interest areas, etc. A booklet was printed and available online, including an explanation of the program; photos/brief biographies of the 21 mentors and organizing staff; and the schedule of mentoring events.

The innovation for 2015 was the use of cell phone technology for registration by and communication with mentees. (The initial idea came from Victoria Scott – prior mentee and current mentor.) The technology idea (using EventBrite) was fully developed by Mera Boulus, the coordinator of volunteers at the 2013 (Miami, FL) biennial conference who volunteered to assist Gloria for the 2015 conference. (Although a paper option was offered, all participants had smart phones or tablets.) Conference attendees registered as mentees via digital technology – some prior to arriving at Lowell, others on site. Pilot tested with several early registrants before arrival in Lowell, the technology was put to its test in Lowell, with mentees lined up and clamoring to be registered as soon as mentoring registration was opened. Once registered, they signed up for small group discussions (or to be on the waiting list once a group was filled, i.e., 8 sign up's) via this technology. All those signed up for groups automatically received a welcome message, informing them of the specific room number for the group. In addition, each received a later reminder of their commitment to attend. No-shows at the mentoring discussion groups have always been a problem. In Miami, a number of filled groups that had waiting lists ended up with half empty, without an efficient way to alert the next person on the waiting list that he/she could attend. In Lowell, once a drop out messaged Mera, she quickly messaged the next person on the waiting list (even minutes before the group was to meet). Of course, some drop outs did not message her, but the use of digital messaging certainly made this easier and more likely.

Approximately 40 persons attended the orientation breakfast. Seventy-five mentees participated in the small group discussions – many participating in more than one. Since these discussions were held over four (breakfast and lunch) time periods, participants could conceivably participate in as many as four groups. An unknown number of informal meet-up's with mentors (the 21 wore MENTOR ribbons whenever available to chat) also took place, although this opportunity continues to be underutilized by mentees, despite constant efforts (e.g., a contest run for those obtaining signatures of mentors with whom they chatted individually as a spur to actually approaching mentors). Some of this can be explained by intimidation (despite our best efforts to de-intimidate the process) but more so because many in the potential mentee population are overscheduled at the biennial conference.

As soon as the 2017 site was announced, Gloria contacted the Canadian organizers (through Tim Aubrey), offering the biennial program again. It is hoped that measures can be taken – early – to prevent the recurrence of problems that continue to bedevil the mentoring program, such as attention to the mentoring program by the overwhelmed (by details and by their fulltime academic duties) conference organizers; insufficient rooms for discussion groups; early and continued announcement of the availability of the mentoring program; availability onsite of sufficient printed copies of the mentoring booklet, etc. Using the digital experience gained at the 2015 conference, Mera Boulus will tweak the 2015 technology (and take advantage of new technology that might appear within the next two years) for the 2017 conference. For example, while EventBrite proved very efficient for data entry, it was less successful in delivering text messages (e.g., giving room number) to enrolled mentees – it appeared that some EventBrite messages went to spam so were not viewed. Another issue to be confronted in the future is the availability of (consistent and sufficient) conference volunteers during the crunch period for registering mentees. BTW, the recruitment of quality mentors has always been the easy part.

A caution about interpreting the mentoring program evaluation, conducted as part of the overall conference evaluation by Kwesi Craig Brookins and Sharri Binder. As reported by Kwesi to Gloria just a few days after the evaluation survey was opened for responses, more people already had designated themselves as having been mentors (23) as had, in fact, been official mentors (21). (And at least half of the official mentors had not yet taken the survey, many of whom were travelling after the conference.) Clearly, there was a misunderstanding by some as to what was meant by "biennial conference mentors." On that basis, we can expect that a certain number of those responding to the (anonymous) survey as having been mentees did not, in fact, participate as registered mentees. Thus, the evaluation of the mentoring program should be taken with a grain of salt.